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ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS

New developments in conference servicing

Report by the Executive Director

Summary

At its seventeenth session, the Governing Council adopted decisions 17/34, 17/36, 17/37 and 17/38, relating to conference servicing, with a view to providing a more cost-effective service to meetings, i.e. to Governments, and introducing new technology which would provide significant cost savings to the implementation of the UNEP Programme and help make Nairobi a major United Nations conference centre. The present report reviews new developments introduced into conference servicing in UNEP since the seventeenth session of the Governing Council.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

(a) Take note of the present report of the Executive Director on new developments in conference servicing;

(b) Commend the Executive Director for her achievements in remote translation and for providing diskettes containing meeting documents to delegates attending meetings under UNEP auspices;

(c) Encourage the Executive Director to study further technological improvements in order to provide modern, cost-efficient conference services at Nairobi and for meetings elsewhere;

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* UNEP/GC.18/1.

(d) Urge the Government of the Republic of Kenya to continue to assist the Executive Director in providing the required infrastructure to facilitate the technological innovations programme for conference servicing, in particular in the field of telecommunications;

(e) Request the Executive Director to study further the financial viability of establishing a team of interpreters at Nairobi, and if found viable, to establish a team on a pilot basis and wherever possible, to offer interpretation facilities to the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) at cost;

(f) Encourage the Executive Director to continue efforts to cooperate with other United Nations bodies, in particular UNCHS and ECA, in the provision of conference services;

(g) Endorse the Executive Director's efforts to limit documents for the Governing Council to a maximum of four pages;

(h) Request the Executive Director to encourage convention secretariats hosted by UNEP to follow the same practice concerning documents;

(i) Request the Executive Director to submit a report on these issues to the Governing Council at its nineteenth session.

A. Electronic distribution of documents and remote translation

1. In its decision 17/38, operative paragraph 5, the Governing Council requested the Executive Director to keep under review the issue of using electronic mail to distribute official documents of the Governing Council to Governments. In response to that decision, UNEP Conference Services has instituted a new procedure to provide delegates attending meetings under UNEP auspices with all in-session documents on a diskette at the end of each meeting. In this way, delegates no longer have to transport documents from the meeting venue to their countries and can selectively copy relevant parts of the documentation from the diskette. Since the end of 1994, pre- and post-session documents can also be accessed via Internet.

2. Conference Services has also successfully implemented remote translation to service meetings away from UNEP headquarters. This was first done for the First Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Biological Diversity Convention, held in Nassau (Bahamas) from 28 November to 9 December 1994. The implementation of this new technology has made it possible to reduce considerably the cost to Governments of hosting meetings, by avoiding the need to send translators and conference typists from outside the meeting venue to service the meeting. This method of transmitting text between UNEP headquarters and meeting venues anywhere in the world offers the potential for greater cost savings to Governments than hitherto possible. It is the intention to extend this method to cover all future meetings held under UNEP auspices outside the Nairobi duty station.

3. ECA has expressed interest in remote translation between Addis Ababa and Nairobi and UNEP Conference Services is now looking into the possibility of sharing this new technology with ECA for its future meetings.

4. Developing countries that offer to host meetings may derive a special benefit from this method: in instances where proper electronic connections via Internet and modem do not exist, UNEP will try to broker the establishment of a permanent or temporary access to these facilities and provide on-the-job training during the meetings on the use of the technology.

B. Reduction of Governing Council documentation

5. In its decision 17/37, second preambular paragraph, the Governing Council expressed concern regarding the growing volume of documentation being submitted to sessions of the Governing Council. In response to this concern, most documents for the eighteenth session of the Governing Council have been limited to a maximum of four pages (documents such as the Advisory Committee on Coordination (ACC) reports and other inter-agency documents, as well as the proposed programme budget, are for the time being exempt from this limitation).

C. On-site Interpretation Facilities at Gigiri, Nairobi and Remote Translation

6. In accordance with decision 17/34, the Executive Director has kept under constant review the issue of providing on-site interpretation facilities at Gigiri, Nairobi. So far, there is no evidence that on-site interpretation would be financially more advantageous than the use of freelance interpreters. The Executive Director is therefore in the process of evaluating the possibilities for improving the cost efficiency of interpretation for UNEP meetings by a combination of the establishment of a team of permanent interpreters in cooperation with UNCHS and ECA, as well as remote interpretation via electronic means. Potential savings in 1995 - if remote interpretation were introduced - are estimated at approximately US $1 million, based on meetings already projected for 1995, at the time of compiling the present report.

D. Conclusion

7. The results of introducing and maintaining the above new developments in conference servicing in UNEP are considerable. These include: significant cost savings for substantive units and convention secretariats where in-session translation and typing is required; a streamlined, responsive and dynamic Conference Services better able to answer the needs of Governments and requesting officers, and an attractive Conference Centre at UNEP headquarters in Gigiri, Nairobi, with modern technology.

8. The Executive Director's efforts in this respect also contribute to alleviating the impact of conference servicing on the environment by reducing the use of paper; by maximizing the use of low-cost electronic means; by reducing the cost of travel and per diem for staff and shipping costs for documents; and finally, by making use of recycled paper to the largest extent possible.